

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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RICHARD E. DECKER, Publisher

G. F. FOSTER, Editor

Associate Editors

Pat Hitchcock

Ernest Hutter

Victoria S. Benham

Marguerite Blair Deacon, Art Director

Herein lies a safe commentary: a practiced hand, replete with inordinate self-esteem, seldom admits defeat.



ARE you bitter?" the reporter asked.

I raised an eyebrow. "Bitter? Heavens to Betsy, no."

"But you spent four years in prison for a crime you didn't commit."

I smiled gently. "For which the state amply reimbursed me six

thousand beautiful U.S. dollars."

He had evidently done some figuring before the interview. "That comes to about seventeen cents for every hour you spent behind bars."

I shrugged. "You must remember that in addition I earned the regular twenty-two cents per day. Possibly all this qualifies me for

the Poverty Program, but on the other hand I had very few expenses while in residence."

"What are you going to do with the rest of your life?"

He was a very young reporter, so I forgave him. "Young man, four years has not entirely ruined me. The best is yet to be."

Warden Denning handed me a manila envelope. "Would you check the contents, George, and sign a receipt? These are the personal things you had with you when you arrived."

"What's the first thing you're going to do when you get out of here?" the reporter asked.

"Buy a gun," I said.

Warden Denning glanced at me



sharply. "Now, George, you know perfectly well that a man on parole . . ."

I smiled. "But I am *not* on parole, Warden. I am free without strings, eligible to vote and other things."

The reporter chewed on his pencil. "Why do you want to buy

the gun before everything else?"

"I like guns," I said. "As a matter of fact I had a small collection before I went to prison."

He continued to probe. "What's the *second* thing you're going to do when you get out of here?"

"See my lawyer."

"Henry McIntyre?"

"No, not that one. I mean Matt Nelson. I've always felt that his incompetence was at least fifty percent responsible for the loss of four years of my life."

"He was your lawyer at the trial?"

"Yes."

The reporter was thoughtful. "Will you get around to seeing the two men who testified against you?"

I took the wallet out of the manila envelope, checked it, and put it into my pocket. "It's a small world. Coincidental meetings do occur."

The warden sent me on to the Personnel Office where some last minute red tape was unraveled, and when I returned he was talking to Henry McIntyre. They broke off their conversation as I re-entered the room.

Henry McIntyre had been responsible for my release. He is a member of a lawyers' organization which specializes in pursuing cases in which it was felt that injustice

had been done. He is one of those intense, singleminded individuals who cannot be swerved from his course once he is convinced he is right—and that is fairly often. He is, in short, the kind of a man I ordinarily detest. However, this was no time to be ungrateful.

"You may send me your bill," I said. "I honor all my debts."

He shook his head. "No. We do these things only in the interests of justice. Money—or personal publicity—has nothing to do with it. And besides, you averaged only seventeen cents an hour and if I charged you, and the papers got hold of the story . . ." He sighed and moved on to another subject. "Now we wouldn't want you to do anything rash."

"Rash?"

"I mean justice has now been served—even if it has been a bit tardy."

"Really? Justice has been served? You mean to say that the two miserable wretches who committed perjury have now taken my place in prison?"

"Well, no. We really couldn't expect that much."

"But I should still smile and carry on cheerfully?"

"Well, yes, in a way. I mean that revenge will get you no place. And besides that, it would look bad for our organization. After all, we

are responsible for releasing you into society, and it would be a blot on our record if you should suddenly take it into your head to . . ." He waved a hand and let the preposition dangle in mid-air.

I picked up my zipper bag and prepared to leave. "I assure you, McIntyre, that I do nothing suddenly. I always think things over carefully before I decide to act."

It was a two hour bus ride to the city and I arrived there at approximately four that afternoon.

I walked down the avenue to Witco's Sport Shop and spent some time browsing before I purchased a new Ruger automatic. I had it cased and wrapped and went on to Fourth Street. At the Saxton Building I hesitated, then changed my mind. No, Matt Nelson was not a man I cared to see on an empty stomach. I would have a good meal and a night's rest before I would face him.

I had dinner and registered at the Medwin Hotel. In my room, I had whiskey and soda sent up and had barely settled myself for my first civilized drink in four years when my door buzzer sounded.

Two men stood in the hall and both displayed wallets upon which were fastened the shields of city detectives.

The spokesman, gray-haired and evidently a veteran of the force,



introduced himself. "I'm Sergeant Davis. Could we have a few words with you?"

"Of course," and I let them in.

Davis turned down the drinks I offered and got to the point. "We always like to prevent things. We feel that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

I wondered idly how one would translate something like that into metric weights.

Davis took a chair. "You bought a gun, didn't you, Mr. Whitcomb?"

I frowned. "Have you been following me?"

He nodded. "We were tipped off by a few people, including your

lawyer. They filled us in on the situation, and we've had our eye on you ever since you stepped off the bus. What do you intend to do with the gun?"

"Shoot it some time," I said. "And cherish it and keep it free from grime and rust." Evidently I had not answered his question.

"You know it isn't worth it," he said. "You couldn't get away with it."

"Get away with what?"

He studied me for a moment. "Now look, you're an intelligent man. During your time in prison you became the warden's secretary, and he says that he's never had a more competent man on the job. Why do you have to do something so foolish?"

I smiled. "Please don't worry, Sergeant. I never do anything foolish. Never, except by accident."

He stared at me unblinkingly and then sighed. "All right. I can see I'm getting no place. But remember, we're still keeping an eye on you."

When they left I returned to my whiskey and soda and refilled whenever necessary. The next morning I woke up promptly at six-fifteen—a habit which I had acquired in the past few years—and I might even have gotten out of bed, except for the hangover. Perhaps there is something to be said

for clean, regular living after all.

I remained in bed throughout the morning, gradually recuperating. In the afternoon, after lunch, I went to the First National Bank and deposited my six thousand dollar check. Then I went on to the Saxton Building.

When I entered Matt Nelson's suite of offices, it was almost three. Sergeant Davis, his partner, and a rather frightened-appearing secretary, were waiting in the anteroom.

Davis eyed the package I carried under my left arm. "What's that?"

"A pistol," I said.

He shook his head sadly. "Look, have you got a permit to carry one?"

"I don't need a permit to carry it cased; only if I have it concealed on my person."

"Why didn't you leave the pistol in your room? Why bring it here?"

"I checked out of my hotel this morning. They're really too expensive, you know. You wouldn't happen to know where I could find a small efficiency apartment?"

"Why don't you pack that gun in your zipper bag?"

"It's quite full. I simply can't squeeze it in."

Over my protests, Davis proceeded to search me and my possessions. When he finished, he turned toward the door leading to Matt Nelson's private office and

raised his bass voice. "He's clean."

The door to Matt Nelson's office opened slightly and he peeked out. "What do you mean 'clean'? He has a gun, hasn't he?"

"But no ammunition," Davis said.

The door opened wider and Nelson seemed more confident. "Well, well, Mr. Whitcomb, nice to see you again after all these years. I'm happy things turned out all right."

"No thanks to you," I said dryly. "I'd like to have a few words with you."

"Of course," Nelson said. "Come right in." He stopped Davis from following me. "I'd like to talk to Mr. Whitcomb alone, please."

Nelson was a rather sharp-featured, low-browed creature. When I had retained him, I'd had doubts about him, but had laid them aside in the face of a recommendation from an acquaintance. That had been a mistake.

When Nelson sat down at his desk, he opened the top drawer slightly.

I noticed the butt of a revolver. Evidently he was protecting himself against the possibility that I had throttling in mind.

He smiled again. "Mr. Whitcomb, I know you are an intelligent man."

"Thank you," I said. "I have heard that a number of times recently, but I did not come here for

compliments." I regarded him with the accumulated distaste of four years. "Not only did you completely and absolutely bungle my defense at the trial, but you had the incredible gall to render a bill for \$876.14."

He shrugged. "What difference does that make now? You didn't pay a cent."

"I didn't happen to have the money. But what really infuriates me was your attempt to garnishee my wages in prison. There I was sweating in the prison laundry for a miserable twenty-two cents a day and yet . . ."

He waved a hand deprecatingly. "I just thought there was the possibility that you might have something put away and I could scare it out of you." He shrugged. "Besides, the judge threw it out of court."

"Nevertheless, I find it utterly unforgiveable."

Nelson leaned forward. "Look, I'm not a stupe and neither are you. I know you weren't just going to walk in here and shoot me."

"You're certain of that?"

"Well . . . not *absolutely* certain. What I really think is that for a long time you've been planning, and since you have brains you've cooked up something real clever, isn't that right? Something real sneaky? Maybe not even a gun?"

Or a knife? Or—well—anything obvious? And you can wait? You've got time? You can play this war of nerves?"

I looked out of the window.

"Look," Nelson said, "you don't scare me, but I'm a busy man and I can't take this cat and mouse stuff. I mean I just don't have the time. So I'll tell you what I'll do. You don't owe me \$876.14 anymore." He took a piece of paper from the half-opened desk drawer and shoved it in front of me. "A receipt. Marked paid in full and signed by me."

I glanced at the sheet of paper.

"I know, I know," Nelson said quickly. "A receipt is just a piece of paper and it doesn't buy you anything. The State gave you six thousand dollars and maybe you figure you have more than that coming? I don't blame you. It was a bum rap. You may not believe me, but I did my best."

He was right. I didn't believe him.

He reached into the desk again and this time brought out a thick envelope. He fanned the bills. "Count them. Six thousand dollars in hundreds. I'll match the State, dollar for dollar. But that doesn't mean I admit a thing. I've just got charity in my heart."

I examined the money. "This isn't exactly why I came here. And

what am I supposed to do for this six thousand?"

"Just leave me alone." His voice rose slightly. "I don't care what you do to anybody else. That's none of my business. But leave me alone."

I pocketed the bills and smiled slowly. "Very well. You have convinced me of your sincerity. I shall leave and never return."

Downstairs I walked for approximately two blocks before I verified the fact that I was being followed. I proceeded to enter buildings, ride elevators, ascend and descend stairs. Finally I exited into an alley, confident that I had eluded my shadow.

I turned into the avenue and almost into the arms of a rather tall, eager man. He seemed to welcome me. "You lost him," he said.

"Lost who?" I asked warily.

"The cop."

"And just who are you?"

"James Hogan, confidential investigations, et cetera. They were going to hire a lawyer, but then they realized that he might consider what they wanted done to be unethical. But a private detective is geared to do almost anything nowadays, so they hired me."

"Who did?"

"Clark and Tilford."

"Ah, yes, the contemptible liars who cost me four years of my life."

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He wagged a finger. "You won't be able to get at them, you know. The authorities have been forewarned and Clark and Tilford have a police guard. Twenty-four hours a day."

"Good for them."

He smiled slyly. "But you can wait, can't you? Weeks, months, years, and eventually you will get revenge? You will bide your time and watch and wait. A hundred years, if necessary?"

"Frankly, I consider a hundred years out of the question."

"Ah, then you must have something immediate in mind? Something fiendishly clever?"

"Why shouldn't I? I've had plenty of time to think about it, and I'd still be languishing in jail if my lawyer hadn't discovered that Clark was nearsighted."

"Well, Clark didn't exactly *know* he was nearsighted. He thought that's the way things looked to everybody, until his wife got tired of having him stumble over things and sent him to an optometrist. But actually it didn't really make any difference if he *was* or was *not* nearsighted, he would have lied anyway."

I sighed. "Why?"

"It was a spur of the moment thing," Hogan said. "Here was Clark, leading a completely drab, humdrum sort of life, with one day

pretty much like the other. He was really a quite *unimportant* man, to his wife, his family, his neighbors—the world. Then here came this opportunity, this chance to be . . . well, *noticed*."

I was incredulous. "You mean that just because Clark wanted to be noticed he was ready to bear false witness and railroad another man to. . . ."

Hogan interrupted. "He didn't exactly *know* that he was railroading you. He thought he was just backing up Tilford."

I took a deep breath. "And what about Tilford? Why did *he* lie?"

"He didn't want his car searched."

"I suppose he had a dead body in the trunk?"

"No. One hundred pounds of oleomargarine."

I closed my eyes.

"Now here's the picture," Hogan said. "It was two o'clock in the morning. Tilford had just come from visiting his brother in Illinois and he'd loaded up with the oleomargarine because it's a lot cheaper than the more expensive spread. So he's driving through the empty city streets when he hears this burglar alarm ringing and it seems to be coming from Karnecki's Supermarket. Being curious, he stops his car, gets out, and goes to the plate glass windows and looks in. He

sees nothing, but then he hears the squad cars coming. He decides he doesn't want to get involved, so he starts back for his car. But just then the first squad car pulls up and the cops jump out with their guns drawn. They come toward him and he sees immediately what they've got in mind. They think he's the one who set off the alarm, so he panics."

"Why the devil should he panic? In this day and age surely an innocent man has nothing to fear from the law." I thought about that and cleared my throat. "Go on."

"He wasn't really worried about being accused of trying to rob the supermarket. But while the police were clearing him, wouldn't they go about searching his car? For burglar tools or something like that? And then they'd find the oleomargarine, and suppose that got into the newspapers?"

I shook my head. "I am aware that Wisconsin remains the only state in the Union with a restrictive tax on oleo. But it is common practice for Wisconsinites to load up with oleo whenever they have the opportunity to cross the borders of the state, and I have yet to hear of anyone arrested by the police just because he was found in possession of—"

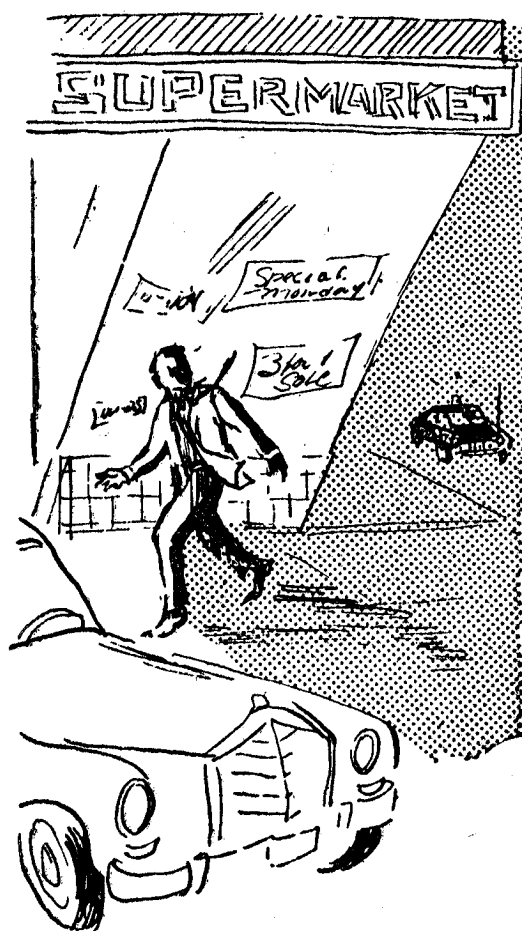
"True," Hogan said. "But don't you remember? At the trial? Til-

ford worked for the Lakeside Dairies—in the *Butter* Division. If it ever got out that he used oleo in his own household, well. . . ."

I understood. "His public image would be destroyed? Also he'd get fired?"

"Precisely," Hogan said, "so he pointed in a general westerly direction and shouted, '*There he goes! He ran out the back way!*'"

"I can understand his desire to divert attention from himself," I said, "but when I and half a dozen others were plucked from the neighborhood streets and brought to him, why couldn't he simply



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have said that he had never seen any of us before?"

"He was going to, but the police had been questioning him in the meantime and he felt they were getting a little suspicious because he was so nervous. He thought they might decide to search his car anyway. So he just pointed once again and said, '*That's him! That's the man!*'"

The very remembrance of his accusing finger still rangled me. "So in order to maintain his Dr. Jeckyl-Mr. Hyde existence, he was willing to send me to prison?"

"Not exactly. What he was going to do was go home, put the oleo in his walk-in cooler and then go back to the police and say he was sorry, but he had made a mistake."

"But obviously he didn't."

"No. Because just as Tilford finished his identification, Clark, seeing his own opportunity for recognition, stepped forward from the small crowd that had gathered, and pounded in another nail, so to speak. So later, Tilford, figuring that Clark's identification was legitimate, came to the conclusion that there was really no point in him changing his own story. The police might become suspicious again and he could still get into a lot of trouble."

I sighed. "And I suppose that Clark—for his part—felt perfectly

safe in grabbing a little of the publicity because he thought that *Tilford* was telling the truth?"

Hogan nodded. "That's the way it went until McIntyre discovered that Clark was nearsighted but hadn't been fitted for glasses until two months after your conviction. Clark couldn't bear to come out bald-faced and confess that he had lied, but he did admit that he wasn't *really* certain that he had seen you at all. Then, of course, when Tilford heard *that*, his conscience began bothering him and he finally had to admit that he *too* wasn't really positive anymore. And—well, here you are, free as a bird."

"Obviously Clark and Tilford are not going to tell the authorities the whole truth, but why have you told *me*?"

"Because I am appealing to your compassion and mercy. These are not evil men. They meant you no harm."

"But they did manage to deprive me of four years of freedom."

He held up a hand. "Clark and Tilford have talked things over. They agree that perhaps there has been a slight miscarriage of justice, so they have decided that just to make things right, they're each going to send you fifteen dollars a week, Forever."

I rubbed my jaw. "*Ad infinitum*?"

"Well," Hogan said, "whichever is longer."

I mulled over the offer for half a minute. "Why don't they just present me with some lump sum? Like six thousand dollars?"

He smiled wisely. "And after you got the six thousand dollars, what would there be to prevent you from wreaking your revenge upon Clark and Tilford anyway?" He chuckled. "No. I advised them to arrange this payment system. Then you will not be tempted to kill the geese that lay the golden eggs."

I gave that some thought too. "Well, it *would* pay the rent," I said finally.

Hogan and I parted amicably and I went into the nearest bar.

How strange fate turns, I thought. Here I had gone to Matt Nelson with a personal check for

\$876.14 in my wallet. In my book, a debt is a debt, even if it is to an incompetent like Nelson, but instead. . . .

I sipped my whiskey.

As for Clark and Tilford, I had not exactly wished them a long life, but I'd had no intention of interfering with the natural course of their longevity . . . and now I had twelve thousand dollars and a weekly annuity of thirty dollars.

That tended to make one cautious—to avoid taking chances.

But no, I had to go through with it. It was a matter of professional pride. I had never failed before.

So at two o'clock that morning I was once again before the safe in Karnecki's Supermarket, and this time I did not commit the error of accidentally tripping the burglar alarm.

IF YOU PLAN TO CHANGE YOUR ADDRESS

PLEASE DON'T FORGET TO NOTIFY US AS FAR IN ADVANCE AS POSSIBLE SO THAT WE WILL BE ABLE TO MAKE THE CHANGE ON OUR LISTS IN TIME TO AVOID SENDING ANOTHER COPY TO THE OLD ADDRESS, THUS CAUSING YOUR COPY TO BE DELAYED AND ALSO COSTING YOU A FORWARDING CHARGE. WHEN YOU NOTIFY US OF YOUR CHANGE OF ADDRESS BE SURE TO GIVE US BOTH YOUR OLD ADDRESS AND YOUR NEW ADDRESS. FOR YOUR OLD ADDRESS YOU COULD SEND US THE ADDRESS LABEL FROM A RECENT ISSUE WRAPPER CLIPPED TO A CARD OR NOTE BEARING THE NEW ADDRESS. ADDRESS CHANGES RECEIVED PRIOR TO THE 10TH OF THE MONTH WILL INSURE DELIVERY OF THE NEXT ISSUE TO YOUR NEW HOME BY THE 10TH OF THE FOLLOWING MONTH. WRITE TO:

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